Angles
New Perspectives on the Anglophone World

1 | 2015
Brevity is the soul of wit

John L. Brown's Epistolary Wit

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/angles/2074
DOI: 10.4000/angles.2074
ISSN: 2274-2042

Publisher
Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur

Electronic reference
Raphaël Ricaud, « John L. Brown's Epistolary Wit », *Angles* [Online], 1 | 2015, Online since 01 November 2015, connection on 28 July 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/angles/2074 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.2074

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The Difficult Art of Practicing Public Diplomacy

Raphaël Ricaud

1 In the East-West confrontation that characterized the second half of the twentieth century, given the impossibility of resorting to the atomic bomb to settle disputes, culture wore combat boots. In the previous decade, there has been a surge of interest in this *cultural* Cold War. Academics have highlighted general tendencies in the war's specificities (Saunders; Caute; Scott-Smith; Cull) whereas memoirs of insiders (Snyder; Esterline; Arndt) offer more personal perspectives.

2 In Arndt's *The First Resort of Kings* (2006), the name of one cultural *attaché* crops up regularly: that of John Lackey Brown (Arndt 126, 130, 194, 341, 354, 421, 565, 577, 584). Depicted as a "witty and fun-loving man of letters" and even a "legend" (130), Brown appears as an appealing figure deserving further study, for although the cultural Cold War has been extensively discussed, the relationship between wit and diplomacy during that era has gone virtually unexplored. Reading Arndt's take on Brown, one could sense that the "legend" might be a good case study, if a paradoxical one. Could one speak of wit as a diplomatic instrument in the midst of a Cold *War?*

3 Brown had written several articles in the *New York Times*. His mission as the literary correspondent in Paris in the late forties had been to take the pulse of the French artistic and literary scene. In these early works, one realizes Brown was well-read, but his articles contain very little humor. Similarly, Brown published another serious work, *Panorama de la littérature contemporaine aux États-Unis* (Brown 1954), an introduction to contemporary American literature entirely written in French for the benefit of French-speaking students. In this anthology, Brown not only introduced authors, he also compiled impeccably translated selected passages from their most significant works. Given this impressive anthology, Brown was obviously also a gifted bilingual academic.

4 Yet another piece by Brown belied the diplomat's apparently one-sided seriousness. In an open letter published in the *Foreign Service Journal* in 1964 entitled "But what do you DO?", Brown humorously described the role of a cultural *attaché* stationed in Europe during the Cold war (Brown 1964). In short, Brown admitted that even though he was originally a cultural *attaché*, he had "often been called upon to fulfill the function of an

agricultural attaché" (25). Brown's open letter was an eye-opener. His derisive take on his profession suggests that diplomatic wit is not necessarily an oxymoron. Was there more to be found in his *private* correspondence? After all, he was a man of letters, in both senses of the term.

5 His correspondence, stocked at the University of Georgetown, contains letters from, and to, individuals such as Josephine Baker, Albert Camus, Mark Chagall, Henry Kissinger, and others. The letters raise a number of questions: cultural diplomacy during the Cold War being serious business, why would Brown choose to resort to wit in the first place? What kind of wit could such a man use? Was wit just an integral part of his personality and could one distinguish the scholar's intelligence, on the one hand, and the humor of the diplomat, on the other? Was the kind of wit displayed by Brown tailored to his correspondents? Did his wit evolve over time, and was it linked to the cultural and political context?

6 To try to answer these questions, I have divided this study into two parts. First, I shall briefly recall the context in which public diplomats were being stationed in Europe during the cultural Cold War. I will argue that, given the impossibility of an open confrontation, East and West competed on the cultural front. To wage this cultural war, America needed to create a propaganda apparatus that would be compatible with its democratic values. Armed with books, knowledge, and literary know-how, men of letters such as Brown were sent out to wage this cultural Cold War by establishing the proper *rapport* between local and American culture and its many agents.

7 In a second part, I will analyze a sample of the letters Brown wrote as a literary agent and those that he wrote as a cultural *attaché* who set the standard for the profession. After discussing the corpus of letters selected for this study, I will analyze Brown's open letter and evaluate its impact before demonstrating how, and why, Brown used wit in the private and business letters I have had access to.

Context

The Cultural Cold War

8 The Cold War (1947-1991) was characterized by political and military tensions between East and West. Both sides retained large stocks of nuclear weapons, yet did not resort to them from fear of mutual destruction. This military stalemate resulted in battles taking on other—sometimes symbolic—forms (Darling 1). For instance, in Europe, war was being waged on the cultural as well as the political front. As soon as World War II ended, the Soviet Union and the US launched a struggle for cultural supremacy, the competition lasting for more than four decades. During this time, the two superpowers tried to "win the hearts and minds" of Europeans by using a wide array of activities, which included cultural exchanges (Caute; Scott-Smith) and advocacy through the cultivation of local elites.

9 Each side promoted its cultural life, hailing it as a reflection of its achievements and values. The US wanted the projection of its art and artists abroad to reflect quintessentially American values. Jazz was a case in point, because it does not apply the harmonic rules and restrictions usually found in Western music; lyrically and melodically, improvisation is key, and rhythmically, jazz borrows from African traditions. The resulting blend is inventive and uniquely American. Additionally, jazz

carries a sense of freedom, a value to be associated with America. But when the US Department of State started sending African-American jazz artists on State-sponsored tours, there was also a political agenda: America needed to dispel the idea that it was institutionally a racist state.

10 Showcasing American culture, underlining its European influences while featuring its distinctive character was one thing, but to win hearts and minds during the Cold War, the US also needed to express an interest in the cultural productions which emanated from the countries it was trying to influence. For example, in the aftermath of World War II, taking the pulse of the literary scene in countries such as France was deemed important. Special envoys reviewed and praised the works of luminaries such as Sartre, Camus and Picasso. To be sure, the cultural was also political: in Washington, the impact that such artists had was assessed in the light of the impact Communism might have on French society.

Creating an apparatus to explain America to the world

11 To organize the battles waged on the cultural Cold War front, America needed to create an official apparatus, as the Office of War Information had been all but dismantled after World War II (Cull 21). Construction of such of a mechanism to project an ideal vision of itself to the world sometimes relied on covert tactics. Scholars such as Saunders (1999) have shown that the CIA used fronts to fund journals. Additionally, we now know that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were, in fact, CIA-funded. So America *did* engage in black propaganda on the cultural front, but this was incidental. More systematically, the US aimed at influencing the world's public opinion in a more democratic manner, using legislative and institutional means. Exerting open influence—also known as white propaganda—on the international scene usually fell in one of two categories: the informational or the relational.

12 In 1948, the US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (Public Law 80-402) was passed in order to use every form of media to foster a favorable image of the United States abroad. This Act, also known as the Smith-Mundt Act, had informational implications. In 1961, the Mutual Education and Cultural Exchange Act (Public Law 87-256), was passed to better cultural understanding between US citizens and those of other countries. The reasoning behind that Act, also known as the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961, was that such exchanges would expose participants to the characteristics of other cultures, all the while promoting their own. It was also believed that the Act would be the start of more amicable relationships between peoples.

13 On August 1, 1953, Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10477, which launched the United States Information Agency (USIA). This institution housed all programs and activities—informational and relational—which aimed at projecting a positive image of America abroad. Today, it is customary to refer to the practitioners who worked for USIA as "public diplomats". Those Americans stationed abroad were Foreign Service officers (FSOs). To that extent, they were *diplomats*, who participated in the extraterritorial projection of America's image to advance its foreign policy. Yet unlike regular diplomats, these FSO's were not conducting negotiations with other representatives behind closed doors; there was no secrecy involved in their advancing American culture. The kind of diplomacy they practiced was not private—in short, these Americans were the *public* face of the United States abroad.

14 In most American embassies in Europe during the Cold War, there were public diplomats in charge of press relations (usually called Information officers or IOs) and others in charge of culture (usually called Cultural Affairs officers or CAOs). CAOs (also known as cultural *attachés*) were responsible for setting up educational exchanges, arranging tours, shows, concerts, exhibitions and lectures, supervising the American library, attending ceremonies, etc. Officially, the job of the cultural *attaché* ended there. However, it was believed that the long-term relationships and influence exerted over the local *intelligentsia*—opinion leaders in their own country—would contribute to advancing the purposes of American foreign policy. In Cold War logic, there was supposed to be a culture/national security nexus.

15 Yet there is an inherent tension in assigning culture a direct, political objective. Admittedly, the cultural *is* political, but this does not necessarily mean American cultural outputs automatically matched the agenda of the US State Department. Additionally, cultural relations might best be understood in terms of *process*, whereas American Foreign policy during the Cold War was stated as an *output*. In short, culture needs *time* whereas foreign policy usually expects *immediate results*. Last but not least, in American embassies during the Cold War, culture was a very broad term. It encompassed anything that did not fit neatly into the other sections of the embassy. As a consequence, the Cultural Affairs officers often had to fix problems that were beyond their scope and men of letters were being assigned contradictory tasks. On the one hand, they were supposed to be Cold Warriors; the pen being mightier than the sword, they were expected to put to use the power of words and ideas to project a favourable image of America. On the other, fighting on the cultural battlefield often required undertaking tasks that had little to do with culture itself.

John Lackey Brown, public diplomat *par excellence*

16 One such man of letters was Dr. John Lackey Brown. Born on 29 April 1914 in Ilion, New York; his father was a businessman and his mother a housewife. He was educated at Hamilton College, from which he graduated in 1935. From 1936 to 1938, he pursued graduate work in medieval studies and comparative literature at the École des Chartes and the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1939, he received a Ph.D. from the Catholic University in America and taught there as an instructor of Romance languages for two years. During World War II, he worked for the Office of War Information as assistant chief of foreign publications, and from 1943 to 1945, he was a member of the staff of the Office of Strategic Services. As the war ended, he wrote a report on France for the Rockefeller Foundation and, after the war, he settled in Paris, where he was the European editor for Houghton-Mifflin Company and correspondent of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. From 1945 to 1949, he also contributed to numerous European and American journals.

17 In the 1950s Brown worked directly for the US government in a number of capacities. First, he was director of the Information Division of the Marshall Plan in France. Then, from 1950 to 1954, he worked as chief of regional services for the United States Information Service at the US Embassy in Paris. He was then posted as cultural *attaché* to the US Embassy in Brussels (1954-58), and later in Rome (1958-62). He also served as counsellor for cultural affairs in Mexico during the sixties (1964-68). Brown eventually resigned from the Foreign Service in 1968, returned to the US and lectured extensively

on American-European literary and intellectual relations at many American universities. He was also a creative writer in his own right and published 9 collections of poems. He died on 22 November 2002.

18 The jobs he held may seem varied, but they have a common core: all entailed managing the projection of America's image abroad. In other words, they all fell into the category of "public diplomacy". In recent literature, Brown has even been hailed as the incarnation of the perfect public diplomat (Arndt 130, 357; Gerits): he was close to the people he worked with, learned but not pedantic, and appreciative of other languages and cultures. All these qualities made him a well-liked American representative,[1] even to the literary luminaries who made a point of publicly criticizing US foreign policy.

19 Interestingly, those who knew him best point out that what set him apart from *other* Foreign Service officers was his well-attuned humor. He fully mastered the art of conversation, mixing cultural references with not-so-serious observations on the absurdities of life, which gave him a distinctive style. Friends and co-workers alike admired his use of subtle aphorisms, well-timed quips and repartee.

20 Due to the ephemeral and private nature of *apartés* (asides) and other closed-doors or intimate conversations, one can only speculate on this Cultural Affairs officer's use of wit and its efficacy. However, one can study his letters, stored at Georgetown University.

Analyzing Brown's correspondence

Designing a representative epistolary corpus

21 The entire John L. Brown Papers collection is stored in 80 boxes at Georgetown's Lauinger library and its off-campus reserve. These boxes are divided in four separate groups. At the time of my visit, in April 2013, the first and third acquisitions were off-campus, and the fourth had not been installed yet. I could therefore only study the second acquisition, which consists in 271 folders of alphabetically-arranged correspondence with well-known twentieth-century figures such as Hannah Arendt, Josephine Baker, Mark Chagall, Albert Camus, Henry Steele Commager, Henry Kissinger, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Carson McCullers, Richard Wright, *inter alia*. The collection also includes letters sent to, and received from, other professional acquaintances. Although the correspondence is not chronologically arranged, it appears that the oldest letter in this series dates from 1946, and the most recent from 1983. All the letters in the collection are unpublished.[2]

22 My interest in these letters arose from a previous study on the nuts and bolts of public diplomacy, during which I observed that public diplomats liked to recount humorous anecdotes from their careers, which contrasted with the gravity of the Cold War. Additionally, I took it that although diplomats praised wit (the utmost manifestation of intelligence), the Foreign Service was supposed to be humor-free (Schmiel). This is when, serendipitously, I realized that the link between American public diplomacy and wit had not been explored.

23 Given the size of the boxes and the limited time I could spend at Georgetown, I have not been able to exploit fully the potential of each letter, and this paper is therefore a

preliminary study on what could be a larger work of the relationship between wit and public diplomacy.

24 In order to select letters that would be a faithful reflection of Brown's entire career, and to constitute a representative epistolary corpus, I first avoided focusing on a single era. I then tried to identify a dozen letters from each decade (from the forties to the sixties), but the resulting sample turned out to be rather unbalanced: 27 letters are from the forties, 11 from the fifties and 16 from the sixties. The reason the late forties are overrepresented is due to Brown's frequent correspondence with Josephine Baker, but each letter can only be fully understood when compared with the entire correspondence.

25 I also endeavored to select both private and business letters. Since private letters are more intimate, they usually reveal more of the writer's self—this is why there are more of them in the final sample. However, in Brown's line of work, friends are often colleagues, and professional acquaintances become friends. When in possession of an entire correspondence, one thus realizes that if the first letter to a given individual is a business letter, the subsequent epistolary exchanges can become increasingly intimate and private.

26 Lastly, for the purposes of this study, I selected letters from a variety of correspondents. I was initially drawn by the identity of well-known writers, artists, anthropologists, etc. However, a more careful study of the content of the letters revealed that the exchanges between Brown and figures who have become twentieth-century household names were not necessarily the best material for exposing wit as diplomacy: Lévi-Strauss wrote to Brown as the French *conseiller culturel* in New York, and as a result, his tone is somewhat bland. Chagall's epistolary style is desperately factual and Wright is telegraphically brief—he just needed a place to stay in Paris. In short, cultural fame does not necessarily produce epistolary wit. As I was to find out later, the study of lesser-known figures would often be more revealing.

27 Brown's career evolved over time and so did the nature of his job. Representing a publishing company and representing a country via its culture require different skills. But the international context and the politics of culture were also prone to changes over time. The nature of transatlantic relations was not the same at the start of the Cold War under Truman and later under Nixon, during which a military conflict in South East Asia overshadowed cultural diplomacy.

28 All in all, I worked on a selection of 101 pages of correspondence. These include 32 letters by Brown and a telegram, plus a blank page with a French Information Centre heading. The remaining pages are letters sent to Brown. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on six letters, or series of letters, each of which is telling in terms of the use of wit *in* public diplomacy, and wit *as* diplomacy. Five were taken from the second acquisition of the John L. Brown Papers collection and one was taken from the *Foreign Service Journal*: the only "open" letter.

29 This study of a sample of letters is a discourse-based analysis: unlike linguists, I worked on these letters from the text down to the phrase and word level.

30 Occasional references to other letters from the sample are made when a factual point needs to be reinforced or explained. Of course, there were letters not included in the sample that would have been interesting to study too, but they did not make the

original cut. If given the opportunity to study at the Lauinger Library again, those could be material for future research.

Talking shop: an open letter

31 Let us begin with a letter in which Brown wittily describes the Foreign Service. Originally, this letter was a speech given by Brown at the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University on January 22, 1963.[3] The speech was then edited and made its way to the *Foreign Service Journal*, which published it in June 1964. Given the content of the text—explaining and justifying the role of a cultural *attaché*—and its intended recipients—Foreign Service professionals—it falls under the "open letter" category.

32 The letter starts with a factual description of what the job of the cultural *attaché* entails. In substance, Brown explains that a Cultural Affairs officer is in charge of educational exchanges, and of all things cultural. Yet an honest assessment of what the CAO had set out to do, when compared to what he has actually achieved, reveals that there is in fact very little regarding culture in his line of work. Too often, pressing business involves prioritizing trivial communication. Alas, he claims, the man of letters soon turns into a soulless machine, performing chores that no one else wants to do.

33 The same could have been said of many other jobs. But what catches the attention of the reader in this open letter is not the content but its form. Brown recurrently uses wit to depict a somewhat depressing picture of the profession without sounding pessimistic. First, the author resorts to using quips in lieu of proper answers. When asked what he does on the job, he retorts: "as little mischief as possible". When questioned about exchange programs, he deadpans that "our exchange apparatus is as complicated as a Dr. Seuss machine".[4] In this open letter, Brown is addressing other members—or would-be members—of his profession. Just like him, they are well-read and highly qualified. The reference to children's picture books is unexpected, unsettling and therefore amusing. This could be the first lesson in diplomatic wit: when faced with a difficult question, a humorous answer lowers tensions and quite often saves the diplomat from having to provide a real answer.

34 Regarding culture, Brown explains that the cultural *attaché* "should share everyone's tastes; nourishing coexisting passions for Grandma Moses and Jasper Johns, Zane Gray and William Burroughs, Leonard Bernstein and John Cage." Brown could have stated simply that a CAO should be open-minded enough to appreciate art in all its forms. But he provides his audience with a list of examples drawn from the fields of painting, literature and music. The humor stems from the combination of extreme opposites as pairs. These cultural references also have another function: they reinforce the cohesion of the group. Indeed, to fully appreciate the incongruity of the juxtaposition of the names dropped, one must be familiar with them. In the sixties, Brown's audience would have been sufficiently educated and up-to-date to appreciate this. However, as cultural references change from one generation to another, humor does not always age gracefully. Would FSOs recognize the names of these artists today? Brown's witty take on the diplomatic world can thus be said to include as much as it excludes.

35 Regarding the tasks no one else wants, Brown uses exaggeration to depict complicated situations. He mentions tourist groups who confront the CAO and "want arrangements made right away for them to take tea with the Queen, or lunch with the president of the Republic, or have a private audience with the Pope." Brown also had a knack for

juxtaposing things that do not belong together, thus poking fun at the absurd. In Brown's world, tourists' requests are hard to turn down, because they are "armed with official letters". In this case, the humor stems from the unexpected juxtaposition of a subject and a verb that belong to two different semantic fields. In an open letter, laughing at overwhelming experiences is certainly more entertaining than a minute description of how the cultural *attaché* actually dealt with them. And for the mental health of the CAO, recollecting problems and laughing them off is therapeutic. Brown ends the first part of the open letter with a metaphor, comparing the cultural *attaché* to a dispenser:

> No wonder that after a few years of this regime, the Cultural Officer, dispersed to the point of being schizoid, despoiled of his cultural baggage if he ever had any, becomes a kind of dispensing machine, spewing out cultural "packets" or "kits" that have been sent to the field for distribution. (Brown 1964)

36 In this case, humor is also an efficient way to bring out into the open the problems inherent in the profession. It is a clever way to voice a complaint without sounding like one is whining.

37 In short, this open letter shows how Brown humorously depicts the job of the public diplomat, and humor serves several functions. Firstly, when using a quip to define the job of the cultural *attaché*, wit is used as an attention-getter. Brown then sets out to depict a rather depressing picture. Wit used at this point provides tension relief (exchange programs compared to complicated machines found in children's books). Secondly, wit is a social identifier: to appreciate the humor, one needs to belong to a certain group—in this case the American Foreign Service. Thirdly, humor is an economical way of passing on a message (*viz*. the tasks required of the cultural *attaché* are hardly related to culture, and largely unfeasible). Given the brevity of the message (man becomes machine), ideas can be floated without having to be explicitly stated. This may explain why wit perfectly suits the world of diplomacy, in which enigmatic phrases trump explicit requests, and where less is more.

38 As evidenced in this open letter, Brown certainly had a talent for describing his professional world with wit. But to what extent did he resort to using wit on the job? As we shall see, Brown's wit depended on several factors: the nature of the jobs he held, the degree of intimacy he had reached with his correspondents, and the political climate of the time.

Private and business letters

39 It is not always easy to determine whether Brown's letters were professional or personal. Some cases are very clear-cut: when Brown was addressing Henry Kissinger, who was head of the International Seminar at Harvard at the time, it is strictly professional correspondence.[5] Consequently, the letters are very dry and administrative in tone.[6] Although they offer the reader much insight into how international exchanges were set up during the late fifties, wit is nowhere to be found, and it is likely that protocol and respect for hierarchy account for its absence. One might add that Brown appreciated neither Kissinger nor his political choices. Exchanging pleasantries with him was therefore neither possible (a hierarchic boundary separated the two men), nor wanted (Brown evinced no desire to become Kissinger's friend).

40 Conversely, given the degree of intimacy Brown reached with Josephine Baker, one might consider their correspondence to be personal. The use of commonplaces, *risqué* remarks, flattering comparisons... all point in the direction of greater intimacy. Nonetheless, their relationship started when Brown, who was representing Houghton-Mifflin at the time, was hoping to secure publishing rights on Baker's upcoming autobiography.

41 It is therefore best not to organize the letters strictly according to correspondents or even according to their content, but rather to study them chronologically, using context and acknowledgement of changing times to reveal the minutiae of Brown's use of wit.

A man of letters out to secure publishing rights

42 Let us start with a series of letters sent to Josephine Baker between 1946 and 1948. To understand the evolving relationship between Brown and Baker, one needs to take into account their entire correspondence.

43 When Brown first addressed Josephine Baker, the letter was perfectly neutral in its tone and very polite in its queries.[7] Most sentences are in fact open-ended questions, and there is not a trace of the good humor and teasing and even *risqué* remarks that would appear later on. The greetings used enable the reader to trace their evolving relationship. The first letter opens with "Dear Mme Baker," the second with "Dear Josephine Baker". Further letters open with "My dears, Jo[8] et Joe", "Dear Josephine", "Dear Joe and Jo" and last but not least "Joe darling".[9] Brown's choice of greetings bears testimony to the changing nature of the ties that bonded him to the Franco-American star. Yet one must keep in mind that, like all good public diplomats, Brown was astute enough never to take the lead in his choice of greetings: he merely repeated or echoed those used by Baker ("Dear Mr. Brown", "My dears",[10] "*Mes Chers, Chers, Chers*", "*Mes amours*"). In this case, Brown's wit stemmed from his ability to adapt.

44 As Brown and Baker learned to appreciate each other, humor made its way into their letters—or rather, good humor, at first. How did Brown set this more pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the notes? How did he set out to make *la star de la revue nègre* laugh? And what was his objective in doing so?

45 At the start of this process, Brown was merely echoing Baker's writings: his letters grew less formal as time passed by because Baker's eccentric style was anything but formal. But Brown did not jump from being polite to being clown-like. The use of humor appeared gradually, in small doses.

46 One safe way to set a pleasant, friendly atmosphere is to use idiomatic phrases. That is precisely what Brown did to open the first paragraph of a letter dated 11 March 1947: "I had lunch yesterday with Jo Bouillon, and we talked of you—I am sure your ears were burning down there on the banks of the Dordogne." Commonplaces are the most adroit manner to get the conversation flowing, so to speak, and that is why Brown resorted to this device to start the letter. One could almost say that he went by the book. Once the pleasant atmosphere was set, Brown tried to win Baker to his side. He had been wanting her to sign a contract with the publishing company he was working for at the time.[11] To do so, he used humor to flatter her. Brown mentions that "the Charleston of Josephine Baker was the *Sacre du Printemps* of 1925." To the reader, this might appear to be an incongruous comparison, for a 1920s popular dance cannot be elevated to the

status of a ballet, just as a quick-paced jazz rhythm cannot be equated with the orchestral work accompanying *The Rite of Spring*. But both the African-American and the classical dances were immensely popular in France in the twenties. Thanks to the humor, which lies in a hyperbolic comparison, Brown's remark does not sound obsequious.

47 Having realized how original Baker could be, Brown decided he could end the letter with a bit of folly himself. Thus the last lines, written in French, read:

> J'espère que vous vous reposez bien, que vous êtes sage, que vous mangez votre viande. Sage mais pas trop, car « qui vit sans folie n'est pas si sage qu'il croit ! » Vive la folie ! (11 March 1947)

48 Translated in English, this could read as follows: "I hope that you are getting some rest, that you are eating red meat, and that you are behaving. Don't overdo it though, because 'those who live without folly are not as wise as they think.' Long live folly!"

49 Brown had now known Baker long enough, and he felt the time was right for his own display of madness to end the letter. The echoing greetings, the more relaxed tone and the quote on folly gave Brown a chameleon-like aspect. He took into account what his correspondent was saying and the way she was expressing herself, and re-injected shape and form into his own letters. This ingenious process is an essential ingredient to successful public diplomacy.

50 At first glance, it might seem strange that an American envoy[12] should play the fool. That said, the above-mentioned letter was a private piece, one not made for public consumption. Additionally, if read carefully, Brown's final lines do not depart from what is expected from a man of letters. Indeed, the original quotation on folly can be attributed to François VI, Duc de la Rochefoucauld, celebrated for his witty aphorisms. In other words, to decipher Brown's use of witty remarks requires the reader to distinguish several layers of meaning. Lastly, one can note that the timing of the pleasantries was not left to chance. One is used to open the letter, another to convince Baker to sign a contract, and a final one is used to close the letter. Humor always comes in the briefest forms and serves a purpose—as an editor, Brown understood the importance of tight editing.

Wit as a seasoned public diplomat's tool of choice

51 Let us now analyze a letter which reveals the importance of what sociologists call *entre-soi* (Tissot), that is to say, what constitutes the world of like-minded people. On 23 June 1968, Brown wrote a letter to Sim Copans. They both had much in common: both had francophone wives;[13] both had studied at the Sorbonne in the thirties and had written dissertations on French topics; both were stationed in London during the Second World War; both had worked for the United States Information Service for which they were expected to "win [the] hearts and minds" of French men and women (Poupon 2000); both taught American literature in French institutions; one wrote a *Panorama de la littérature contemporaine aux Etats-Unis* (Brown 1954), the other had his own radio show presenting a "*Panorama du jazz américain*"... The list of similarities is long. Copans was director of the American institute in Paris when Brown wrote him this letter. In it, Brown tried to convince him to schedule the poet Lloyd Frankenberg (yet another intimate acquaintance) for a series of lectures at the American institute. To do so, Brown ran through a list of the poet's recent achievements and awards, and assured

Copans that he himself had recently secured an Italian tour of lectures for Frankenberg.

52 This letter reads very much like a textbook example of the cultural diplomacy machinery during the Cold War. The protagonists were two like-minded ambassadors, as it were, of American culture. Professionally and personally, they had much in common. They were not only colleagues, but friends. One (Brown) wanted the other (Copans) to schedule a third party, also an American, for a talk in a lecture tour. Given the nature of Copans and Brown's relationship, the nature of the request was not exactly that of asking for a favor, nor was it purely a professional recommendation. It fell somewhere in between.

53 Brown opened the letter by calling Copans, in French, "*mon cher vieux*" ("my dear old pal"). Brown then stated that Frankenberg was a dear old friend too. Brown then reminded Copans that they literally liberated France together, as he mentions "my own best greetings and my memories of l'époque héroïque juste après la Libération." The switch to French halfway through the sentence is meant to make the memory of that epic era even more vivid: Brown and Copans were brothers-in-arms ("*époque héroïque*" could be translated as "epic era"). In short, when addressing Copans as a friend, Brown uses the time-tested logic of "a friend of a friend is a friend," or "he is one of us".

54 But Brown's request resorted to other devices too. Since he was hailed as a highly competent professional, he could recommend Frankenberg as a *connoisseur*. He summed up the poet's career and achievements chronologically, praising his value by making frequent use of hyperbole ("superbly", "such vogue in the past few years", "very successful", "numerous awards", etc.) Yet for fear of overdoing his recommendation, Brown used humor too. In fact, by the end of the third paragraph, the list of flattering phrases had become so lengthy that Brown tried to poke fun at the entire process in resorting to obvious exaggeration: Frankenberg's Italian tour of lectures was supposed to have produced "a lyric delirium the length of the peninsula, from Udine to Trapani." Mimicking Mediterranean overstatement, the joke lightened the mood of the letter which by this point was beginning to sound too serious. As if needing to convince his "dear old friend" that the poet was going to please the French, he added that Frankenberg's wife, painter Loren MacIver, "was recently honored with a one-man show in the Musée d'Art moderne in Paris."

55 By this point in the letter, the bond of friendship is firmly reaffirmed, and the professional aspect has been dealt with. Given the long list of credentials attributed to the poet, Copans is supposed to have swallowed the bait. The humor has somewhat toned down what is at stake: Brown is giving some slack before he can land the fish. He does so in using the following: "the thought has occurred to me that [Frankenberg] might be persuaded to lecture at your Institute. He would be a distinguished addition to your faculty." In a stroke of genius, the Cultural Affairs officer makes it sound as if Copans was going to be the one benefitting from the entire operation. Frankenberg is not presented as the one asking for a tour of lectures, but as the one to be asked.

56 In this letter, Brown acts as a go-between for two friends, who also happen to be professional acquaintances. He does one (Frankenberg) a favour by asking the other (Copans) to schedule him at his Institute. Additionally, in the first part of the letter, Brown almost disappears to the extent that he does not talk about himself. Tact and unobtrusiveness are qualities which all public diplomats must cultivate. Brown obviously had both but used humor when necessary. In this instance, it can be seen as a

lubricant, oiling the cogs and wheels of the machinery of public diplomacy. Bantering as reaffirmation of *entre-soi* enables Brown a witty reversal of roles in which he seems to be doing a favor rather than asking for one.

Acerbic humor: The disillusioned public diplomat quits

57 By 1968, Brown was the counsellor for cultural affairs in Mexico. However, he started to become somewhat cynical about his job. He was conscious that the golden era of USIS[14] was over. In a letter sent to the cultural *attaché* in Brussels, he remarked:

> The situation of USIS as I observed it in Paris and Rome (in Paris particularly) was not very encouraging. There was an atmosphere of gloom and doom, the morale was very low among the local people (they were all afraid of being liquidated), and the Americans just seemed to be marking time, going through the bureaucratic motions without any real sense of purpose or of conviction. No pschitt, so to speak. (Brown, "Letter to Edwin P. Kennedy Jr.," 15 December 1965)

58 The "gloom and doom" assonance rings like a tolling bell. One can sense that the lively spirit of culture in American-European exchanges was no longer there ("no pschitt,[15] so to speak"). It is almost as if it had passed away. As a result, embassy workers were ghost-like, present on the job without really being there.

59 Brown was also disillusioned with the budget cuts which undermined the long-term projects of the United States Information Agency. In the wake of newly-independent countries in sub-Saharan Africa, he talked to Washington's "new top brass" and tried to point out the foolishness of under-funding European posts, (rightly) claiming that African elites[16] were still being trained in Europe, but to no avail. He concluded, rather bitterly, that in spite of past services and sensible intuitions, his advice would have no impact on the course the funding of culture was taking: "what good my small voice will do is another question."[17]

60 Let us now end with one last letter which lets us in on Brown's resignation. On 23 June 1968, John Brown sent a letter to his friend, Lloyd Frankenberg, and his wife, Loren MacIver. Brown no longer felt he could represent the United States abroad, especially under Nixon. Additionally, his job at the office entailed more and more administrative tasks, and only rarely cultural ones, which bored him and stifled his creativity.

> Did I tell you I am resigning from the State Department? I weary of trying to be a "civil" servant and go to the office every morning. (And more seriously, to "represent" even very modestly, a regime with which I have no sympathy). (Brown, "Letter to Lloyd Frankenberg and Loren MacIver," 23 June 1968)

61 Factually speaking, Brown was providing Frankenberg and MacIver with breaking news. He was considered to be one of the best at what he did, and yet he had decided to resign. But here, instead of dramatizing the situation, Brown played with words, as if to lighten the blow. In this, the puns are revealing. First, there is the pun on him no longer wanting to be a "civil" servant. Brown felt that being urban and polite made no sense when he no longer believed in the task. In 1968, Brown was in his mid-forties and felt it high time he made a stand and spoke his mind on American foreign policy. He disagreed with the choices made by the Nixon administration, and felt he no longer wanted to be a part of a Department whose aim was to represent the United States abroad. In short, the messenger disagreed with the overall message. It is no accident that Brown should refer to Nixon's administration as a "regime", a term borrowed from the French which often has negative connotations in English.[18] Brown not only felt that

his political views were in conflict with those of his employer, he also believed that America's cultural enterprise was being sabotaged from the inside (he mentions a 60 percent budget cut in educational exchange and in cultural activities generally). Brown sensed it was time to jump ship—it was sinking.

Conclusion

62 John Lackey Brown's correspondence was witty in many ways. A brilliant student of literature, he had an excellent mind and memory which he put to professional use. Studying the letters he sent and received, one realizes that he was astute in his judgment of persons (letters to Kissinger) and situations (letter to Kennedy, letter to the Frankenbergs), and had the intelligence to adapt. Sometimes, such intelligence relied on mere common sense (letters to Baker); at others, it took more ingenuity to get recipients to want what he had planned (letter to Copans, letter to the Frankenbergs). Yet most of Brown's epistolary wit was in fact humor (aphorisms, quips, self-deprecating remarks, irony, etc.) which seems to be perfectly woven into the fabric of each letter and custom-tailored to suit the rank and the personality of his addressees. Humor always comes in these letters in the briefest forms and serves a purpose: for Brown, as a human being, it was an act of catharsis; as a former editor, he understood the importance of timing and tight editing; as a diplomat, he was expected to establish lasting relationships in host countries while advancing national interests. Humor helped in this fascinating, albeit sometimes contradictory, mission (as shown in his open letter).

63 The early years of the Cold War, during which Brown worked for Houghton-Mifflin can be seen as "formative years", as if he was learning the tricks of a trade which formally did not yet exist. These activities indirectly prepared him for what he was involved in when he became a "real" diplomat. Additionally, the humor, irony and wit that characterized him at the time reflected how he would put these to use in subsequent activities as a cultural *attaché*. In both capacities, Brown always used humor to ease the negotiating process—in the end, his jobs entailed having his correspondents wish what his employer wanted them to wish. As long as Brown the messenger agreed with the message, all he had to do was be himself, for as he put it: "I'd really like to explain that my purpose in life, if you want to get down to that, is being, not doing" (Brown 1964).

64 When the international context changed, the Cold War front moved from culture in Europe to conflict in South-East Asia; *Realpolitik* replaced containment and its associated war of ideas and ideals. The messenger no longer felt at ease with the message. This carried repercussions that go well beyond the realm of ethics. In fact, it meant Brown had lost all desire of wittily putting culture to use to advance his country's interest. Again, Brown himself stated this best in the form of a quip:

> [The cultural *attaché*] must understand (and if possible, love) before he can convince. [He] soon comes to realize that his job is really a form of love-making and that making love is never really successful unless both partners are participating. (Brown 1964)

65 In the end, wit was not an addition to Brown's diplomatic endeavor, but an integral part of it: quips were tension relievers, strengthening trans-national bonds that united him to his peers; they fostered a sense of belonging to a community of *literati* and noted actors on the cultural scene. But they were also a way to word things that could not be

otherwise expressed. As such, Brown was not the epitome of the cultural *attaché* because he used wit *and* diplomacy, he stood out because he used wit *as* diplomacy.

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NOTES

1. Brown's academic view on cultural diplomacy was not always welcomed by others in the United States Information Agency, however (Gerits 42).

2. There are exceptions, however. A 1963 letter makes an explicit reference to a talk Brown gave to an assembly of American Foreign Service officers. The talk bore on what the profession of the cultural *attaché* entails. At the request of John P.C. Matthews, Director of the Foreign Policy Association programs, the original text of the talk was then edited and made its way to the *Foreign Service Journal* in 1964.

3. University of Georgetown, Lauinger Library, Special Collections, John L. Brown Papers II, Box 2.0, Folder 79.0, John P.C. Matthews to John Brown, 23 January 1963. For all subsequent correspondence from this collection, only the author, recipient and date of the letter will be noted. Full references appear in the bibliography.

4. Dr. Seuss invented several machines. Since Brown does not expand on the issue, there is no way to know whether he is referring to the ones in *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Dr. Seuss 1961), or to the "Audio-Telly-O-Tally-O-Count" (Dr. Seuss 1962). Both machines are complicated.
5. Henry Kissinger, "Letter to John L. Brown", 2 November 1966.
6. Henry Kissinger, "Letter to John L. Brown", 11 March 1959, 6 April 1959, 31 January 1963, 2 November 1966. John L. Brown, "Letter to Henry Kissinger", 7 August 1958, 17 March 1959, 14 April 1959.
7. John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 2 December 1946.
8. Josephine's then husband was French composer Joseph "Jo" Bouillon.
9. John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 9 December 1947.
10. At this point, Baker had met the Brown family.
11. "At any rate, may I ask that you give Houghton Mifflin a priority chance to read the manuscript that you are preparing?" John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 2 December 1946. "I am very anxious that Houghton Mifflin have an option for publication rights in America." John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 7 December 1946.
12. Although Brown was representing Houghton-Mifflin at the time, one could argue that he was also indirectly representing America itself. For more details on this and the Informational Media Guaranty, see Parry-Giles (2002, 10).
13. John Lackey Brown was married to Simone-Yvette Levesque, originally a French-Canadian citizen, and Sim Copans was married to a Frenchwoman, Lucienne Godiard.
14. Technically speaking, the Department of State had "lent" Brown to USIS (USIA's designation overseas). As such, he belonged to the rare breed of super CAOs.
15. Pschitt was a popular soft-drink brand at the time, especially in France and Belgium. In French, the onomatopoeia "pschitt" is also an allusion to something which is running out of steam.
16. In his letter, Brown specifically mentions Senghor, whom he believes to be essentially European in his culture.
17. John L. Brown, "Letter to Edwin P. Kennedy Jr.", 15 December 1965.
18. The term is generally used to designate a government headed by a single, powerful individual who is not a democratically-elected leader, and who maintains power by force rather than by free elections.

ABSTRACTS

John Lackey Brown was a literary correspondent in Paris in the aftermath of World War II. He was later posted as cultural *attaché* in Brussels, Rome and Mexico City during the first two decades of the Cold War. Those who knew him best say he was appreciated for his good humor, wit and love of culture. He is even said to have set the standard for the profession. *Verba volant, scripta manent* (spoken words fly away, written ones remain). Due to the ephemeral and private nature of asides, one can only speculate on this Cultural Affairs officer's use of wit and its efficacy. However, there is a host of archival material at the Lauinger Library (Georgetown University) which can be mined for answers. Based on a sample of these letters, this paper sets out to classify and analyze the use of wit Brown made in his varied correspondence, and to study the extent to which it served a diplomatic purpose. In the end, I show wit was not an addition to

Dr. Brown's diplomatic endeavor; it was an integral part of it. Quips were tension relievers, strengthening trans-national bonds that united him to his peers. But they were also a way to word what could not otherwise be said. John Lackey Brown was not the epitome of the cultural *attaché* because he used wit *and* diplomacy. He stood out because he used wit *as* diplomacy.

John Lackey Brown était le correspondant littéraire du *New York Times* en poste à Paris au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Lors des deux premières décennies de la Guerre froide, il fut attaché culturel dans les ambassades américaines de Bruxelles, Rome et Mexico. Ceux qui le connaissaient le mieux disaient de lui qu'il était apprécié pour sa bonne humeur, son esprit et son amour pour la culture. Au sein de sa profession, il faisait figure de modèle. *Les paroles s'envolent, les écrits restent*. En raison de la nature éphémère et privée des apartés, on ne peut que spéculer sur l'utilisation de l'esprit dont faisait preuve cet attaché culturel dans ses démarches diplomatiques. Les archives de sa correspondance, en revanche, demeurent et méritent être étudiées (elles reposent à la bibliothèque Lauinger de l'université de Georgetown, à Washington D.C.). Cette étude, fondée sur un corpus représentatif de cette correspondance, vise à classer et analyser l'esprit épistolaire de Brown, et à dégager le bon usage de l'humour en matière de diplomatie. Les échanges épistolaires de Brown témoignent du fait que l'esprit n'est pas un « plus » diplomatique, mais qu'au contraire, faire preuve d'esprit entre pleinement dans le cadre du processus diplomatique. En effet, les traits d'esprits permettaient à Brown de détendre l'atmosphère et de resserrer les liens transatlantiques qui l'unissaient à ses pairs. Par ailleurs, les bons mots permettaient d'exprimer ce qui ne pouvait être formulé autrement. Ce n'est donc pas parce qu'il faisait preuve d'esprit *et* de diplomatie que Brown était considéré comme le modèle même de l'attaché culturel, mais bien parce qu'il se servait de l'esprit *en tant qu'outil* diplomatique.

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Keywords: USA, foreign policy, Cold War, public diplomacy, wit, Brown John L.
Mots-clés: politique étrangère, États-Unis, Guerre froide, public diplomacy, trait d'esprit, Brown John L.

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